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INFO RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 1300
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SUBJECT: THE AMBASSADOR AND VFM LE VAN BANG DISCUSS HUMAN
RIGHTS, APEC/BILAT IDEAS, MFA LEADERSHIP CHANGES, BILATERAL
ISSUES

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11. (U) THIS IS AN ACTION REQUEST: PLEASE SEE PARAGRAPH 5.

12. (SBU) Summary: Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang made a push for a meeting with Secretary Rice for Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan in Washington on June 19, reviewed noncommittally our proposals for possible substance for the President's visit to Vietnam (such as Peace Corps, PSI and Article 98), and talked about human rights issues. There will be three significant GVN delegations to Washington in the coming weeks. VFM Bang said he is working hard with the Ministry of Public Security to win positive changes on religious freedom, and said the MFA is working on prisoner releases. On the subject of the Democratic Party of Vietnam (DPV), he was stony and uncommunicative, saying only that this is a "very serious" issue and that the USG should stay out of it. Both sides are looking for progress on their property acquisition issues, with the GVN hoping to get some written guarantees from the USG. Foreign Minister Nguyen Dzy Nien will retire in a month, and Vice Foreign Minister Le Cong Phung is angling for the Washington Ambassador position. End Summary.

VU KHOAN'S VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES

13. (SBU) The Ambassador met June 7 with Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang and Deputy Director of the Americas Department Pham Van Que, at a local hotel at VFM Bang's invitation. VFM Bang advised the Ambassador that planning for Deputy Prime Minister Vu Khoan's June 19-21 visit to Washington is underway, and asked the Ambassador to push hard to convince Washington principals (especially Secretary Rice) to see Vu Khoan. (Note: we have learned from EAP/MLS that none of the principals DPM Vu Khoan asked to see will be available to meet him. We have communicated this to the MFA. End Note.) This important visit will be Vu Khoan's last official trip to the United States, VFM Bang said, and it is proper for the man who has overseen the U.S.-Vietnam relationship for so long to have a chance to exchange ideas on bilateral relations as well as the regional and international situation at a senior level one more time. VFM Bang added that Vice Foreign Minister Le Cong Phung and Assistant Foreign Minister Nguyen Duc Hung will accompany Vu Khoan. Phung, VFM Bang noted, is hoping to replace Ambassador Chien in Washington, possibly at the end of the year.

APEC/POTUS VISIT

14. (SBU) VFM Bang said that collecting and sharing information on the President's visit to Vietnam will be an important part of DPM Vu Khoan's trip. The MFA understands that President Bush is considering a second stop in Vietnam, such as Danang, Ho Chi Minh City or Hue. This is a good idea, VFM Bang said, but he strongly suggested that President Bush pay his call outside of Hanoi after APEC. Ideally, VFM Bang said, the President would have his official meetings and the bilateral visit just before APEC, attend the APEC leaders summit, and then visit one of the other cities in Vietnam on the way out. VFM Bang added that bilateral visits with China, Russia and Japan are all in the works during the APEC period. (Note: The new Chinese Ambassador to Vietnam, Hu Qianwen, told the Ambassador President Hu Jintao will attend APEC, but without a bilateral component to the visit. End Note.)

15. (SBU) VFM Bang said the MFA wants to know what the U.S. preferences and priorities for the APEC discussions are. Vietnam wants to work with the United States to make sure the discussions address the right subjects, he added. In addition, the MFA would like to work on a possible joint statement and a plan for concrete results from the visit. The late summer and early fall will be busy, with many officials on vacation. To avoid a potentially difficult last-minute rush, we should work on these key elements of the visit now, he said. The Ambassador said he will consult with the APEC office in the State Department to determine top U.S. priorities and see how we can cooperate with Vietnam to advance those. He agreed that the U.S. Embassy and the MFA should be working together on the practical aspects of the President's visit as soon as possible. ACTION REQUEST FOR EAP/EP: Please provide a response for us to use with VFM Bang regarding their offer to work with us to advance our top three APEC priorities.

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PEACE CORPS

16. (SBU) The Ambassador suggested that announcement of a Peace Corps program in Vietnam would be an excellent deliverable for the President's visit, and noted that the Peace Corps' Advance and Assessment Teams are coming to Vietnam this summer to develop the concept further. The USG wants to ensure that the Peace Corps contributes in a meaningful way to Vietnam's development, the Ambassador said, and therefore wants Peace Corps Volunteers to operate outside the main cities. The team should have access to provincial capitals in all three regions, he said. English language teaching should be the primary focus for early Peace Corps volunteers, but later it might be possible to expand into health and environment assistance or other fields. VFM Bang cautioned that the Peace Corps is still quite controversial in Vietnam, and it might be necessary to change the name to "American Volunteers" or something similar. It might also be necessary to start in the big cities, he said, and expand outward to the provinces step by step. At first, he said, the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations (VUFO) led by National Assembly member (and former Ambassador) Vu Xuan Hong will be the counterpart for the visiting Peace Corps officials, but later it will be the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) and possibly the Ministry of Health. (Comment: Post will continue to work on steering the GVN away from any attempt to limit the PCV placement to Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. We will follow up with Ambassador Vu Xuan Hong. End Comment.)

PSI

17. (SBU) The Ambassador recommended that the United States and Vietnam pursue some formalization of the GVN's current "case by case" position on PSI. Nonproliferation, as a

joint concern of both the United States and Vietnam, is an ideal area to pursue greater cooperation. VFM Bang said this needs to be considered at the working level, but the GVN supports the idea in principle. Vietnam can participate in PSI actions on a case-by-case basis assuming there is proof of a dangerous shipment or cargo. The Ambassador suggested that an interim step might be to participate as an observer in a PSI-related exercise, perhaps hosted by Australia. VFM Bang noted that politically, in Vietnam there is the perspective that PSI is an imposition on Vietnam of the United States' strategy and policy.

Article 98

18. (SBU) The Ambassador said he is aware of Vietnamese sensitivities surrounding an Article 98 agreement, specifically Vietnamese concerns that EU displeasure over signing an Article 98 agreement with the United States could result in some action taken to block Vietnam from the WTO. However, an Article 98 agreement is consistent with U.S. and Vietnamese policy and interests, and is very important to the United States. We would like to discuss the possibility of developing a possible Article 98 agreement, the Ambassador said, under the assumption that EU leverage over Vietnam will decrease in the future. The EU is putting a lot of pressure on Vietnam over this issue, VFM Bang confirmed.

MFA LEADERSHIP CHANGES

19. (SBU) Foreign Minister Nguyen Dzy Nien will retire in one month, VFM Bang said. Other changes will also occur. "Some of the Vice Ministers want to stay, and some want to go. I think I might want to go." He repeated that VFM Le Cong Phung is angling for the Washington ambassadorship, and mused that he himself might be headed overseas again. "Of course I would have to find a place more important than the United States," he said, chuckling. Assistant Foreign Minister for the Americas, Nguyen Duc Hung, has been named Ambassador to Canada but is not certain when he will go to Ottawa, VFM Bang said. "He has to get the current Ambassador out of there first."

PNTR AND DELEGATIONS TO THE UNITED STATES

110. (SBU) As part of the GVN's effort to help secure passage

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of PNTR, VFM Bang said the "three diplomat Vu's" are leading delegations to the United States in the next few weeks: DPM Vu Khoan; VUFO President and National Assembly delegate Vu Xuan Hong; and Chairman of the National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee Vu Mao. VFM Bang said his recent trip to Washington had been a success, and said his 16 meetings on Capitol Hill had been positive. He acknowledged that Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) might not have been completely convinced, and said the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington had been tasked with providing follow-up details to all interested Congressional offices. VFM Bang was optimistic about the GVN's chances of securing PNTR. "We have overcome many difficult votes," he said, "and our margin gets better and better. This one is permanent, and may be harder, but we will probably be fine." He said the GVN has not yet counted votes, but feels that the visit of Secretary Rumsfeld, the President's upcoming visit and other events "expand the overall picture." Timing is on Vietnam's side, he said: he had heard from both U.S. and Chinese officials that Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to the United States was a failure, which further improves the PNTR environment for Vietnam.

111. (SBU) The Ambassador cautioned that trade votes in Congress are always difficult, but that the U.S.-Vietnam

bilateral agreement has a good commercial basis. However, there are those who do not want to see Vietnam get PNTR or for the U.S.-Vietnam relationship to advance. Those people will be pushing human rights issues particularly intensely in coming months, the Ambassador predicted. Timing is in fact tight; there is not much time left to secure votes. The Vietnam vote will need everyone's help and support, he stressed.

¶12. (SBU) "We need a simple majority, 51 percent," VFM Bang replied. The GVN is doing its utmost on the human rights and religious freedom issues, he said. VFM Bang and Vice Minister of Public Security Nguyen Van Huong have consulted regularly on the issue of religious freedom, along with Chairman Ngo Yen Thi of the Commission on Religious Affairs. "We have agreed to concentrate on the Northwest Highlands to get them to adhere to the law and to improve the situation there the way we did in the Central Highlands," he said. There are problems, including differences of opinion so sharp they divide families. "In some places, they say they have no religious believers. But in the same places, there are people who say they are religious believers." The Ambassador and VFM Bang agreed that the likelihood of Vietnam's removal from the CPC list before the PNTR vote is nonexistent. VFM Bang complained that Vietnam's continued presence on the CPC list is difficult for him personally, because he suffered criticism for signing the letter on religious freedom and then the USG did not remove Vietnam from the CPC list. He said he hopes the USG has a clear understanding that improvements in the Northwest Highlands will have to come step by step, and will not occur immediately.

¶13. (SBU) The Ambassador stressed that for the USG to recommend the lifting of CPC, there will have to be "visible progress, such as church openings and registrations, people openly practicing their religion and discipline of local officials who violate the ordinance on religion." In addition, we continue to wait for the province-by-province breakdown of religious improvements promised by the Committee on Religious Affairs in earlier meetings. VFM Bang promised to follow that up.

GENERAL HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE DPV

¶14. (SBU) Even more important for PNTR than religious freedom will be general human rights, the Ambassador said. Several high-profile political prisoners, including Pham Hong Son and Nguyen Vu Binh, continue to sit in jail. Releasing them will be a strong indicator that things are improving in Vietnam, the Ambassador said; if the GVN has any intention of doing so, the sooner the better. VFM Bang said the GVN is working on the issue of the high-profile prisoners, and hopes to have an answer before the PNTR vote.

¶15. (SBU) The USG notes with interest the developments related to the recent re-establishment of the Democratic Party of Vietnam (DPV) by certain political dissidents, the Ambassador said. The U.S. Embassy hopes that the lack of a crackdown on these individuals represents a GVN decision to

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expand the political space available to individuals in Vietnam, which would be a positive development. After a chilly pause in the conversation, VFM Bang said the DPV represents an extremely serious issue on which all sides should be very careful. Recent actions, including the internet release of the transcript of a meeting between the DPV and western diplomats is "too much" and could represent a "break point" in the bilateral relationship. "Sometimes we can bring issues up for discussion with each other," VFM Bang elaborated. "And sometimes, the issue is so serious I can only talk about how serious it is. This is one of those times." He said he had told the Australian ambassador that Australian Embassy meetings with the DPV are bad. "The more

you get involved in that, the more you will drive Vietnam away from you," VFM Bang said. The Ambassador noted that the GVN was also guilty of releasing confidential meeting information on the internet, and that the USG objected to being used by either side for political purposes. "We support freedom of speech and peaceful political organization. We are interested in the activities of this group, but not involved." They are a small group and no threat to the regime, the Ambassador concluded.

¶16. (SBU) The Ambassador informed VFM Bang that U.S. Embassy personnel will be making more trips to the Northwest Highlands and northern border provinces in coming months as we try to verify the religious freedom situation for ourselves. VFM Bang said he has been receiving complaints from the People's Committee chairmen in the northern provinces asking him to slow the pace of foreign visits. "The visits have become too frequent," VFM Bang said, "and the provinces are suffering from overload." The Ambassador said that these trips are a necessary part of diplomacy and asked VFM Bang to assist in convincing the provincial authorities to facilitate the trips.

PROPERTY ISSUES

¶17. (SBU) VFM Bang said that he has talked to officials from throughout the State Department in his effort to resolve remaining property issues. He said Vietnam will not link the outcome of their property search in Washington to the outcome of the U.S. negotiations in Hanoi, or any other issue. Vietnam simply wants a legal assurance that they can search for and acquire a property for their Embassy in Washington. "We need clear, written legal permission," VFM Bang said. He said that in the future, the GVN might want to open a consulate in Houston or Chicago. The Ambassador said that EAP and OFM are working on a property acquisition roadmap to help clarify the GVN's concerns, and said this would be ready in 1-2 weeks. VFM Bang said the GVN has already lost properties that would have been perfect. One property on Massachusetts Avenue had been available for USD 9 million, but subsequently was sold to another Embassy and is now on the market again for USD 20 million. "That is expensive for us, we cannot lose that much money," VFM Bang said. The Ambassador commiserated, noting that the Hanoi People's Committee has kept the United States Government waiting for a property for ten years.

¶18. (SBU) VFM Bang also said that the GVN would like to figure out how to regularize the status of consular officers working in its office in New York. "We need a note in writing from the U.S. State Department agreeing that we can use one officer solely for consular work," VFM Bang said. The Ambassador noted that this is exactly what the USG has been asking the GVN for over the last eight years - a note spelling out the formal rights of U.S. diplomats in Ho Chi Minh City. "Both sides should have such assurances," the Ambassador said.

¶19. (SBU) Comment: VFM Bang was his usual, pragmatic self, offering possible solutions or promises of information for virtually all of the issues raised. His behavior when we talked about the DPV, however, was cold. He answered questions very slowly and carefully and did not stray from a formal, guarded script. Where other issues might warrant a promise to "work on that," the DPV question prompted only a warning to stay away from a very serious issue. That cannot be a good sign. End Comment.

MARINE